



Nick Licata
Seattle City Councilmember

August 12, 2014

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
United States Senate
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
H-232 U.S. Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Majority Leader Reid and Speaker Boehner,

I am requesting that the Senate and the House, either jointly or separately, hold a public briefing on the tragic bombings of UN facilities in Gaza, which have resulted in significant civilian deaths. Its purpose would be to determine if innocent deaths could have been avoided and, if so, whether the U.S. bears some responsibility.

Our culpability could stem from the recognition that the U.S. funds a substantial portion of Israel's military budget. In September 2012, The Jerusalem Post reported that former Israeli Defense Force (IDF) Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi told a conference that U.S. taxpayers have contributed more to the Israeli defense budget than Israeli taxpayers over the past three years. Israel is our ally and the recipient of about a sixth of our total foreign aid, according to a 2001 Congress Watch report. And, it notes, that does not include the billions in U.S. loans that have been waived for Israel.

The US has declared Hamas a terrorist organization, and thus we have no direct responsibility for their actions that would warrant a similar briefing. Obviously, however, their shelling of innocent Israelis is likewise worthy of international scrutiny.

The circumstances of UN civilian facilities in Gaza being bombed have prompted the need for a congressional investigation. We know that a UN school sheltering some 3,000 displaced people in Rafah was bombed just outside its open gate. According to The Guardian, the coordinates of the school, like all UN facilities in Gaza, have been repeatedly communicated to Israeli Defense Forces. The Guardian also reported that it was the third time in 10 days that a UN school had been hit. The UN Rafah school bombing prompted the U.S. Department of State to issue a statement saying that, "the United States is appalled by today's disgraceful shelling outside an UNRWA school in Rafah sheltering in which at least ten more Palestinian civilians were tragically killed."

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State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki called for “a full and prompt investigation of this incident as well as the recent shelling of other UNRWA schools,” but it was unclear who was to conduct the investigation. Certainly it cannot be fairly conducted by either party involved in the conflict, although they certainly should have the right to submit information about it to the investigative party. I believe Congress should work in partnership with the UN by conducting an investigation as to why there have been such a high number of civilian casualties in Gaza. Their findings would then be presented to Congress.

The investigation should not be conducted with any political agenda, but should instead be an audit of how U.S. foreign aid may be a contributing factor in the Gaza crisis. Our democracy stands as a model for guiding the hopes and desires of people throughout the world who wish to have open and accountable governments. To boldly hold neutral hearings on the crisis will provide us greater security in the world than any amount of military aid could provide.

I recognize that the Senate unanimously passed Resolution 498, which declared that Israel has a right to defend itself. However, the question before all of us is at what point a defensive military force creates a humanitarian crisis in another state, and whether U.S. tax dollars are contributing to the crisis in Gaza. The 139 square mile territory contains 1.8 million people who literally have nowhere to go. The U.N. reports that medical facilities are “on the verge of collapse,” more than 270,000 people are crammed into 90 U.N. shelters, and a recent attack on a Gaza power plant has left half of Gaza’s residents without electricity.

We need to show the world that we care about the welfare of all people and that we hold our allies to that same standard. To do otherwise would endanger our relations with many nations with whom we seek to live in peace.

Sincerely,



Nick Licata

CC: The Honorable Senator Maria Cantwell
The Honorable Senator Patty Murray
The Honorable Representative Jim McDermott
The Honorable Representative Adam Smith